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Three Qualitative Studies of Cultural and Temporal Adaptation of Africans at Home and Abroad

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This research note describes three qualitative projects that I conducted on the topic of cultural and temporal adaptation in Nigeria and of Nigerians living abroad. The first was a pilot study that laid the groundwork for two subsequent studies conducted in Nigeria, and of Nigerians living in Asia. The process of academic discovery is too-often presented as pristine; that is, as unblemished by learning experiences. However, the process of research is often marked by trial and error, where both positive and negative experiences build toward scientific discovery and academic insight. The purpose of this research note is to explain, in a personal way and in as plain language as I can, the process of discovery and the content of these studies.

ADAPTATION OF NIGERIANS LIVING ABROAD: A PILOT STUDY

The first project was a pilot study that examined the subject of cultural adaptation to “time regimes,” which can be defined as the cultural contexts in which time has particular meaning and rules the thoughts and behaviors of its inhabitants. Time regimes have certain characteristics. Actors are expected to assimilate to the time regime, or run headlong into conflict. Time regimes are dynamic, meaning that they are subject to change. Changes in living conditions, such as the transformation of peasant society to an urban society, is shaped by new organizational structures; it forces people to a new perception of time and time management. The main factors in the creation and management of time regimes are: (a) the historical epoch, (b) the level of economic development and urbanization, and (c) level of exposure to foreign culture.

Considering these factors, I argued that how time is understood and used in sub-Saharan African (Africa is a very large and diverse continent: to enhance the

readability of this article, hereafter I use “African”) countries is conditioned by the radical social and economic transformations that occur in their country. “From all 49 sub-Saharan African countries I focused on Nigerian example. Africans can develop new relationships to time by changing the environment – i.e. time regime – in which they live. This is observed in African immigrants in the countries of Western Europe.

How Infrastructural Problems and Stratification Influence Time Use

Infrastructural problems rule time use and dictate the parameters of the Nigerian time regime. In developing cities such as Lagos, the largest in Nigeria, a major obstacle is the poor infrastructure of urban roads; this causes transport problems and, thus, an inability to plan for the immediate time future. Poor infrastructure results in huge traffic jams that make even short distances hard to predict how long it will take to navigate. Unpredictability of travel in a city, both by private car and bus, are conditions that make people expect to be late for appointments and other pre-arranged meeting times.

Nigeria is a case in which economic stratification leads to disparities in access to basic infrastructure, such as electricity and water. Despite that Nigeria is a country with abundant deposits of oil that are converted into electric power, Nigerians are often cut off from a regular supply of electricity. Irregular supply is the result of corruption, the lack of oversight and control over the state energy industry, and the lack of effective management of natural resources. Nigerians, despite having electrical installations in their homes and despite the water pumps installed to ensure access to running water, are often deprived of electricity and water; as such, they are forced to install additional means of these basic resources. Yet, only some of them can install private closed-circuit generators that provide energy to the private homes and public institutions. To power up several hours of access to electricity, Nigerians are forced to buy gasoline at a service station, and supply it to its diesel generators. Only the few can afford to purchase diesel and gas regularly.

Lack of stable electricity and water shapes household management. Basic activities such as a morning bath, breakfast preparation, boiling water for a warm drink or a meal occurs in homes with no running water or electricity. It forces housewives to buy small portions of food every day, so that they have not been spoiled in the humid and hot climate. In their budgeting of time, the housekeeper must consider daily shopping and daily preparation of meals for families that are lengthened by the need to first warm water on the stove oil, and refill kerosene stoves, to cook meals often on a single burner stove. Intermittent access to running water forces Nigerians to buy water for bathing, or forces the necessity of an earlier collection of rainwater in big containers which are set outside the house

during the rainy season. A typical day begins with sending a member of the family to purchase water, gasoline, and kerosene. The inhabitants of Lagos became accustomed to inconveniences and these inconveniences are inscribed in the way they perceive and use time.

This was the context of the first study I now discuss, that was conducted in November of 2010 among Nigerian students studying at a university in the UK. I was interested in how migrants begin to see the organization of time in their home country and how the new place of residence shapes their new approach to the time factor and efficiency. I conducted a focus group interview with Nigerian students, born and raised in Nigeria, currently staying in England.

In this early study, I sent invitations via email to Nigerian students to participate in the focus group interview and a short questionnaire. In response to my email, I received seven applications. In the group interview, four people attended, and only one was a woman. Three people have begun studies at the university in the academic year 2010/2011, and this was their first visit to the UK. The interview lasted a little over an hour. The nature of the interview was informal, based on open ended questions.

Although the theme of the group interview was the cultural concept of time in Nigeria, I found substantial differences in their everyday use of time caused by change of place of residence. Nigerians who had emigrated to the UK reported that they changed their time management strategy. This involves, they said, the need to adapt to new conditions and the necessity of the effectiveness of their actions.

Focus group participants reported many examples of the differences between Britain and Nigeria, pointing to an efficient time system thanks to a well-developed public transport network. In Nigeria, there is a basic problem of public transport, as it does not have reliable timetables. Participants reported that this was a very important issue in being able to plan their day and meet deadlines. The problems of public transport are “solved” with private carriers, who start the bus route when they collect enough passengers to make it profitable. Poor timetables hinder the inhabitants of Nigerian cities to accurately plan their itinerary; they have to rely on the number of fellow passengers.

“So, for instance on the bus station in Canterbury if two people are waiting for bus, okay, if the bus is supposed to leave at 2 [o’clock] they will leave at 2 [o’clock], but in Nigeria... the bus has to be filled. Otherwise you have to pay extra price.”

In the UK, transparent public rules, fewer corruption problems, and a well-organized social system allow migrants to plan their time and use it more effectively.

An anecdote illuminates this culture shock: In 2009 I conducted an interview with a Congolese woman who lives in Scotland. For many years and she worked as social worker helping other Africans to adapt in a new social environment. She said that the most common issue which African migrants in Scotland have to learn is keeping time and follow by the strict rules which are effective in a UK system; punctuality and good organization is necessary for survival. In this way, she helped them to overcome the “cultural shock” to the time regime.

Interviews conducted with Nigerians who left their country many years ago and got to know Western time regimes quickly lose their former of perception of reality. One Nigerian interviewee (in 2010, in Sweden) who spent half her life outside the home country gave the following example: she was back in Lagos and she had an appointment with the government’s administrative staff. She appeared at a fixed location on time, but the government worker was not there. After a little while, she called the government worker, who confessed frankly that he had just taken a bath. The guy assumed that it was understandable explanation given problems with water, electricity and transportation. Other residents of Lagos sharing similar conditions could more easily understand the circumstances that prevent the efficient organization of the plan.

Respondents asked about the issue of time management by white Europeans consider the subject as sensitive. This sensitive response resulted primarily from predominant prejudices about so-called “African time,” i.e. that Africans have no sense of punctuality. Even though I was intimately aware of, and sensitive to, this problem, it impeded greatly on my research. This was especially true of my study in the UK. The African-Nigerians treated the meeting more in terms of explanation to me as an outsider, as an inhabitant of Europe, as a white person, issues related to the topic of the interview. They phrased responses to me as ‘you in Europe’, and ‘you Europeans’. One of the interview participants admitted that he signed up to take part in a study organized by me primarily to give examples that will contradict negative stereotypes about Nigerians’ concept of time. Two weeks after this focus group interview, one Nigerian student told me that many of his friends, also studying at the University of Kent, reacted very negatively to my email invitation to participate in the focus group as they expected racist attitude due to the topic of the research.”

TIME MANAGEMENT AND WORKPLACE ORGANIZATION

The second project was carried out in 2008–2012 and focused on social time in the context of contemporary sub-Saharan African culture; Nigeria, specifically. The problem of time is associated with the issue of work: how work is managed depends on culturally-influenced time perceptions. Societies undergoing radical

transformations in economic and social development, such as Nigeria, experience major cultural changes that extend to the workplace. These changes come from their own local culture, and from outside influences as the local culture interacts with Western standards and expectations. I had three guiding research questions. First, to what extent do external forces – particularly the quality of the urban infrastructure, such as access to water and electricity – influence standards of time perception, time management, and work? Second, given these external forces, how does Nigerian culture influence time management and work organization? And third, how and to what extent do Nigerian organizations adapt or resist Western standards of management?

Africa, as elsewhere, there is a major urban/rural divide in cultural norms, and as such I focused on Lagos, a very densely populated city. This was an ethnographic study, and I spent six months total (three months in 2008, two months in 2011 and one month in 2015) in the former capital city of Lagos. Below I will present the research design from 2011 when I was doing research among local NGO's trying to understand their organizational culture according to time management.

The research aimed to study of patterns of time management that are influenced by features of local culture and individuals' professional background and attitudes. I concentrated on various elements of the workplace and the workers: type of leadership; impact of cultural habits of employees with respect to their observance of traditional, modern, and mixed values; level of supervision and workplace authority; employees' attitude to officially imposed rules of time arrangement; employees' attitude to religion; the issues of submission and innovation among employees; the importance of family ties in a workplace, including attitude towards elders; and attitude to ritual activities in an organization related to time regime.

I conducted participant observation in six non-governmental organizations. I selected these organizations based on their main source of financing. I assumed that the source of financing would influence the NGO's internal organizational culture. Specifically, I assumed that NGOs whose primary financial source was from the West, e.g. Europe or the USA, would impose rules about time use that would bend toward Western standards. Support from Western donors would impose Western time values in Nigerian institutions.

This is not what I found. I found that NGOs applied their financial sponsor's structure of organization of administrative section only in a few cases. Financial support from Western foundations does not necessarily eliminate local cultural elements in the Nigerian workplace. The features of other organizational culture coexist with original features of African culture. In case of foundations established by local Nigerians, I assumed that there would be acceptance of local behavioral patterns. I understand local behavioral patterns as norms of personal relations,

from religion to professional activity. However, local foundations were established by Nigerians who were already influenced by the cultural adaptation process. They introduced to their institutions an organizational culture that they experienced in their former workplaces, and in most cases these were companies with Western roots.

In most cases, time management was dependent on the training and proclivities of the executives who run the NGO, not the funding source. The biography of the leaders influenced organizational culture in foundations managed by them. Other factors, such as the number of employees and company size were not essential. The leader and his professional biography was the key issue.

In sum, the environmental and socio-economic situation in a macro scale influence time perception, time management, secondly work management dependence on time perception. According to these factors Nigerian non-governmental organizations adapt to modern work-styles based more on individual leadership presented by the director or owner of the organization rather than Western sponsors of these organizations. Nigerian NGO's using modern business tools provoke implementation of strict time management tools. In this sense they are more efficient than the government sector. But at the same time they provide their employees with the opportunity to cultivate positive values based on local culture like family, religion identity and social cooperation.

CULTURAL ADAPTATIONS OF NIGERIANS LIVING ABROAD

The third project examined Nigerian migrants living in foreign societies. The resulting project, which is now being concluded, is “Africans in Asia: China and Malaysia as new Directions for Nigerian Migration.” China and Malaysia are main educational destinations in Asia for Nigerians, who perceive that the studies, diplomas, knowledge and experience gained in Asia have similar value to those from the traditional Western countries. My main research questions were: (1) What are Nigerian students' strategies for overcoming the challenges of daily life of Nigerians in Asia? (2) After graduation, how do Nigerians translate their education into new opportunities? (4) Is education in China or Malaysia a final step in the process of building a future career in Nigeria, or just a stop *en route* to the West, or a necessary level for continuation of professional career in Asia? And (5) To what extent do these new channels open space for intercultural exchange?

I chose Nigerians for two main reasons. First, the projects I described above provided me with deep knowledge about Nigeria and Nigerians. This knowledge formed a baseline to understand the cultural struggles of Nigerians living in a foreign land. Second, the country is a major power in the region of West Africa, which recorded strong economic growth and social development. Nigeria is

among of the wealthiest countries of Africa. This is mainly thanks to the presence of oil, the raw material that is so important for Asian countries. The newly formed Nigerian middle class has new access to both Western and Asian foreigners in their country, and they have the ability to travel to Europe, USA and Asia. The affluent segments of Nigerian society are greatly interested in providing education for themselves and their children at prestigious universities abroad. So far, the United States of America and the United Kingdom were the major educational centers chosen by Nigerians. However, Asia is fast becoming a popular destination.

As a result of geopolitical changes of the last years, new directions for African migrations emerged. Migrations of Nigerians to South-East and East Asia should be seen in this context. Countries such as China and Malaysia offer attractive markets and education, including bachelor's, master's degree and post-graduate studies. Trade and higher education are increasingly sought after by Nigerian businesspeople, a key group of professional middle-class Nigerian society. According to preliminary interviews conducted during my second stay in Nigeria in 2011, I discovered that Nigerians choose the Far East due to lower cost of living in major urban centers of China and Malaysia. They compared this to American and British cities, and Asian universities in urban settings offer lower tuition fees at as well as high level of education. Friendly trade (and other) relations between Africa and the South East and East Asia are due to the experience of post-colonial heritage and the perception of global development.

I used snowball sampling to obtain a list of Nigerian students. I started with Nigerian academic colleagues who gave me contacts to their students currently residing abroad in Malaysia. In China I contacted a member of the Association of Nigerian Students in China (ANSIC) who provided me contacts to local Presidents of Nigerian student organizations in each Chinese city where I conducted research. I wanted to speak with a broad range of students according to gender, university degree, and religion. In Malaysia I conducted interviews with 46 students, and in China with 56 students.

In individual and group interviews, I obtained demographics (age, ethnic group, religion, marital status and a city of origin), as well as current type of study and previous education. We discussed issues related to individual decisions about studying in Malaysia or China and what they thought about their host Malaysian and Chinese universities, referring to quality of education and organizational aspects. We talked about previous migration and tourist experience, and in particular, challenges in adapting to China and Malaysia. We discussed social activities on and off the campus, group membership, organization of daily life and free time, and their opinion about racism in the new host country. The last part of interview concerned their future plans after university graduation.

Similarly to results from the pilot study, Nigerian students in China and

Malaysia faced a cultural shock related to new time regime. The first problem was the need to adapt to new time zone in Asia that forced students to change their internal biological rhythms. My respondents reported that they had to sleep few hours a day mainly between 5-8 am local Malaysian or Chinese time. During the day they attended classes; during the night they tried to keep in touch with their families and friends back home. There were some cross-national differences. The well-organized public transport mainly in Malaysia, where timetables are provided in English, aided the Nigerian students. In China the signs are only in Chinese; many of my informants used to take a wrong bus or metro in an opposite directions than they want to until they learned the Chinese language. Nigerian students reported that they appreciated the Asian attitude toward time and the value of work.

REMARKS ON THE METHODOLOGY OF THE THREE STUDIES

The methodology I used for academic discovery was a cumulative process of research experiences. In all three studies, I used qualitative methods. They varied with the purpose of the research: in-depth individual interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation and analyses of secondary data. The use of qualitative data in the second study, and the necessity of being embedded in Nigerian society during my research, was informed by my previous experience of doing research in Nigeria. In Nigeria (both in 2008 and 2011) I lived with a Yoruba family for a number of months. My hosts were rooted in the Lagos State for generations, I used to spend most of the time in their environment, ate traditional meals with them, witnessed house arguments and disagreements. I travelled using local means of transportation, such as quite dangerous motorcycle-taxis (called *okadas*) that do not often respect traffic regulations, or in minibuses (*danfoes*) that allowed me to hear spontaneous prayers of passengers and their daily conversations. Often it made local people express surprise, because they were accustomed that *Oigbo* (a white person in Yoruba language) travels in luxury, air-conditioned cars, or at least they use taxis.

In Nigerian culture, as it is in Eastern Europe, social ties are very strong and the hierarchy plays a special role in every official or private group. Trust and reliability open many doors in Nigerian communities. During my field research in Lagos I found that friendly relations with inhabitants of the neighbourhood and with workers of the NGO where I had internships provided valuable information. In the Nigerian cultural context the use of *snowball sampling* proved to be an effective strategy.

A challenging aspect of doing research with Nigerians is the problem of interpretation of the gathered material. It is well illustrated by the words: ‘The

truth of a culture, group or way of life cannot simply be passed directly into another culture's (the ethnographer's own) words, and there are almost always competing claims to what is important, and how things are to be understood even within the group being researched' (David&Sutton, 2004, p.104).

Finally, I would like to emphasize the importance of sensitivity. As with the pilot study in the UK, I found that the topic of time management among Nigerians, both at home and abroad, was a sensitive issue. In my second study, for example, I initially met some of the same resistance I experienced in the pilot study; many of my informants rejected the "African time" stereotype and wanted to self-present in a positive way. The interaction between Europeans and Nigerians should be attentive to these sensitivities, both in the fieldwork period, and in the interpretation of the data.

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